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FAREWELL

A Sermon

PREACHED AT ST. PETER'S CHURCH, VERE STREET
ON DECEMBER 8, 1907

BY THE
VERY REV. W. PAGE-ROBERTS, D.D.
DEAN OF SALISBURY

Privately Printed

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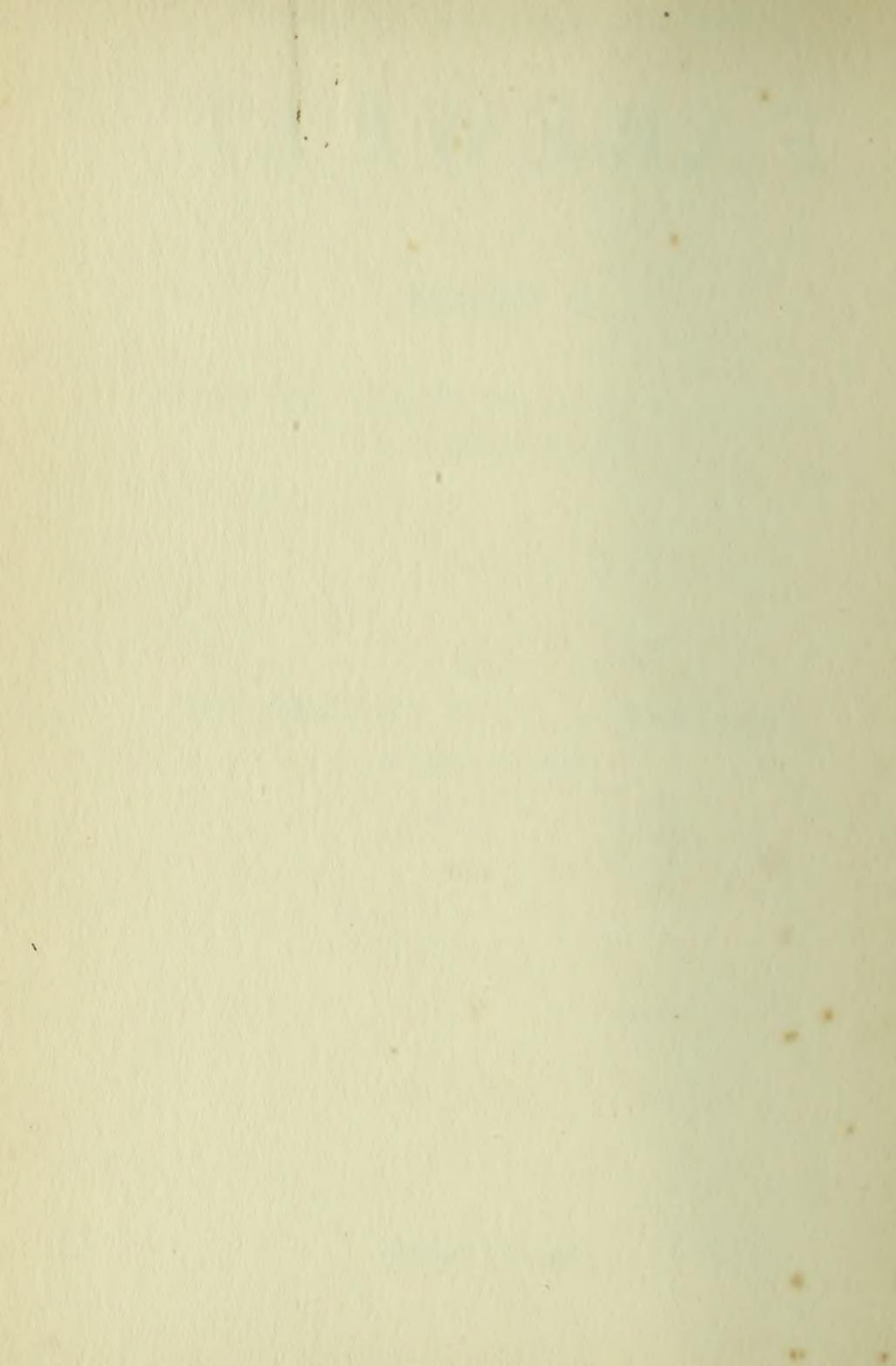
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TO THE DEAR MEMORY OF
FRIENDS DEPARTED
AND TO
FRIENDS WHO STILL SURVIVE

ATTACHED TO THE AUTHOR'S MINISTRY
AT ST. PETER'S, VERE STREET

HE DEDICATES THIS SERMON

THE DEANERY, SALISBURY:
January 1, 1908



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*This Sermon is printed at the instance of some
of the Congregation of St. Peter's, Vere Street, and
by one of them, Reginald J. Smith.*

S E R M O N

‘The world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

I *St. John*, ii. 17.

THERE are moments in our lives when we have special reasons and powerful impulses for looking into our position and possessions, and for seeing clearly how we stand in relation to the forces which environ us and the possibilities which confront us. We can scarcely do this when we are overwhelmed by pressing affairs, or restless with unsleeping ambitions, or fascinated by those absorbing affections which make sleep a wasteful necessity unless it be a delightful dream. We certainly cannot do it when disease mingles fact and fancy in feverish hallucinations, or pain makes ceaseless

moanings, or weakness subdued to deadly weariness, or old age is feeble in mind and body and totters onward to the grave. We cannot survey life and calmly adjudicate upon its significance in the hours which lead to death. Only now and again do we stand still and strong and ask, Where am I? What am I? Where am I going? Then, like a great surprise, we realise how marvellously things have changed since we first looked upon the world with mature intelligence; how great are the changes in ourselves. So powerful is the impression of change that we are led to exclaim, Is it all change? Is there anything abiding? Is there what the old Hebrew literature poetically described as a rock of ages amid the whirling sand-storms and mocking mirages of this ever-changing life which is to many so dusty, dull, and drear? Health, friends, fortunes, governments, social ideals, scientific theories, religious creeds and organisations change and pass away. Human

life seems like an endless procession ever moving to an abyss which swallows all up to be seen no more. Is there nothing certain, nothing abiding? we ask in the brief periods when the movement seems to stop for a moment, when 'we look before and after and sigh for what is not.' Is there nothing which remains amid the onward movement to the speechless gulf of death? I stand still for a moment, and backward cast an eye on this long ministry of mine, and see that it has been marked by startling changes. Large increases of knowledge have been made which have modified many old conceptions, given new aspects to many old-established theories, and removed some from the place they have long held in the popular creed. Such changes have acted, it may be unconsciously, upon me as they have upon you, and we have been varying together. Am I, as I close this ministry, to cry to you, like a singer of sad songs, that 'nought endures but mutability'; or can

I, after deep reflection and from the bottom of my heart, declare that, if some beliefs have vanished and others have been transformed, in Christ Jesus there is a sure foundation for thought and life beyond the action of time and all its powers of change? Yes! It is so with me to-day. This in the past I have maintained with you. This is what I shall continue to proclaim in the days which may still be mine: that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day and for ever.'

Some one recently asked—so I have been told—and asked with a tone of regret—whether I was not growing more orthodox. If being orthodox means being faithful to truth as it emerges and demands recognition, then I pray that I may be more and more orthodox until the perfect day. If being orthodox means incapability of progress and an obstinate faith in the infallibility of the past, then I pray that I may not be orthodox; and, if I know myself, I am sure I am not.

But, it may be said to me, You are not altogether ignorant of what science and criticism have made known. You have recognised weak places and shaken buttresses in the structure of ecclesiastical religion. If now you affirm that Christianity is the one thing sure amid all the dislocations and demolitions which have taken place—when even the artisan of the clubs scoffs at Christianity and looks to Socialism for the regeneration of society—if this is the case, then it may be said to me, You have lost your old receptivity, you have sought shelter in obscurantism, or you are acting a part in a drama of illusion, or preferment has subdued you to prudence ; and, in the worst sense of the word, you are more orthodox. Now it is a fact that certain theories once supposed to be inseparable constituents of the Christian system have been so shaken and shattered that they are but historic ruins which men pensively behold but cannot inhabit. The doctrine of the verbal infallible

inspiration of every verse of the Bible has now but few advocates. Once it was universal. The authorship of the sacred books is eagerly discussed and has become an open question. The doctrine of tormented and eternal sin maintained in existence by Divine Power is now rejected by many devout souls; and other doctrines, once held in crude, materialised forms, have assumed more rational and spiritual aspects. Good Christian people have adapted themselves to these changes, and now regard them with untroubled acquiescence. But in the days when some of us were young, the first movements in the direction of such changes aroused the fury which piety is not incapable of exhibiting. We can remember the violence with which the authors of "Essays and Reviews" were assailed. But the writer of the first of them became an honoured archbishop of Canterbury. We can remember the turbulent cries of convocations and congregations when Bishop Colenso popularised some of

the conclusions of German scholarship. But High Churchmen may be seen accepting them. We can remember that a fascinating and religious volume called "Ecce Homo" was declared, by perhaps the most useful Englishman of the last century, to be "vomited from the jaws of hell." The memorable minister of this church, who has had a formative influence upon the religious thought of Nonconformity as well as upon Anglicanism, and who is said to be represented by the late Bishop Westcott, by Dale the Congregationalist, and by the present Bishop of Birmingham, was expelled from his professorial chair in King's College because of certain theological opinions. But the teachings of the saintly Maurice, which have been assimilated by leaders of the High Church party, were condemned by the learned and brilliant Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford—Dr. Mozley—who said that the action of King's College was 'a substantial duty to the Church and

nation in suppressing at once a teaching that interfered with the foundation of religion and morals.' The late Archdeacon Denison wrote to Liddon of 'Gore's miserable heresy'; and Liddon replied, 'I have tried to tell Gore as explicitly as I can how wrong I think his language.' But the Gore so sternly condemned is the present Bishop of Birmingham, one of the brightest ornaments of the High Church party. So that all the original and leading minds in the Church, be they High or Broad, have had to bear the reproaches of the timid and the paralysed. Yes! In a few years things have marvelously changed. Many an old belief has been swept away or only hides itself in the sects of obscurity. But Christianity has not been swept away though High Churchmen have become disciples of Colenso, and Ritualists are to be found who allow the hopes for which Maurice suffered. But it will be said, if modifications of old beliefs have taken place why do you not change such

of your old formulas as do not conform to the more enlightened ideas of the present? Because large numbers of Churchmen have not accepted the new ideas and are content with the existing formulas. Such ideas as they have they imagine to be the very same ideas which the framers of these formulas possessed. Not that they have very seriously looked into what they call their beliefs or are familiar with the ideas of past ages. The sound of the formula is satisfying and a change would be disturbing. 'Desiring no change they wish for no ideas.' But it is as impossible for any man to think exactly the thoughts, with their assemblage of associations, which the Fathers of the Church thought, as it is for us to think exactly the thoughts which will be thought centuries hence. Change is incessant. Change is universal, however in its continuous process it be unperceived. Only when change is perceptible, considerable, and generally realised can formal change be profitably

made. Otherwise to change might do hurt to thousands of simple saintly souls ; and ‘through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died’ ? As Newman said in the *Apologia*, ‘There is a time for everything, and many a man desires a reformation of an abuse, or the fuller development of a doctrine, or the adoption of a particular policy, but forgets to ask himself whether the right time is come.’ Every party and fraction of the Church would like some change made to suit itself in the services of the Church. But our duty is to think of others and not merely of ourselves. Only when the majority of a church advances to the position of the forward spirits can reconstruction take place, and the advances of whole churches are slow indeed. Therefore imperfect forms must be endured until a general advance has been secured ; and they may be endured and profitably employed even by the most advanced spirits. For these forms indicate

that which is essential and that which is unchanging. They contain the germs of higher developments, and without them the higher developments could not have been attained. Implicitly they hold the higher truth. The essence of Christianity is the Spirit of Christ. This is the soul of His religion, and the formulas are but attempts of fallible men to give expression to this Eternal Spirit and the Divine facts on which it depends. All such attempts, however commendable, are but provisional. New modes of expression must from time to time be required by changing minds, which are the products of changing knowledge. Even the dullest change. They can't help changing. Language is ever changing, and changing language is the manifestation of changing mind. But whatever the changes which loyalty to truth as it is revealed makes necessary, they will only imperfectly symbolise the Eternal Spirit, the Holy Spirit of Christ, which He Himself exhibited in the words, 'I came not to do

Mine own Will but the Will of the Father which sent Me.' Let that Spirit of Christ be supreme in you, and the forms will be etherealised, however advanced your ideas, and in them and through them you will see your Lord. This I specially say to you who are impatient with and complain of certain forms and expressions of the Church's service. Abide by your Church and help to secure its progress, and show sympathy and consideration for the weaker brethren. Do not leave your Church to the dominance of the dull and to certain decay.

This, then, is the abiding, to do the will of God as it becomes revealed. But that will and word of God are not only to be learned from Bibles and Prayer-books. They are to be learned from the activities and laws of nature and from the revelations of national and social life. Against these words of God the churches have too often set themselves in opposition. Science they have condemned and social requirements

resisted. We are not Christians—that is, not reconciled to God—until these words and laws of God are loyally accepted ; and they are most Christian—suspected though they be—who keep open minds, and to all the revelations arising from new knowledge and changed conditions reply, ‘I come to do Thy Will, O God.’ Again I say, this is the abiding, varying as it must in its modes of expression, as it must in its requirements from age to age. It is the abiding because it can adapt itself to the teachings which scientific, social, critical, and historical progress enforce, so that it can never be out of date. It is the abiding because the Spirit of Christ in man aspires to the perfect, and therefore carries the soul onward in pursuit of the ideal beyond the confines of death. It is the abiding because at the same time it is the everlastingly progressing. Yes ! the world is ever changing, and theology is no exception. It also pursues an evolutionary development. But ‘this is life

Eternal, to know Thee the only God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.' As your old pastor and friend I bid you be faithful to this progressive spirit. The movement of thought will go on, the increase of knowledge will proceed. You must appropriate the new knowledge, and let it work its reshaping influence upon older adaptations. No cowardice must enervate you ; no Papal denunciation of Modernism arrest you :

' Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell.'

New works for the well-being of the community, and especially for those who have least of this world's goods, will solicit your co-operation. No selfish entrenchment may restrict you from sacrificing for the good of mankind, if, indeed, you have His Spirit Who 'went about doing good.' New adaptations of form and service may in time be called for in the Church we love so well—the Church of England, which is the most spacious sanctuary of Spiritual freedom

the world has ever seen. It will be for you, while elastic in mind and tolerant in spirit and sympathetic in word and conduct, stoutly to oppose a return to the obscurantism of the past, ever defending the gains which the great Reformation secured.

But as I stand here, now that my responsible ministry in this church—which will ever hold a foremost place in my heart—has come to an end, and as I review the long years gone by, a voice of sadness sighs in my heart, change! change! For the great angel of change is death; and how much has he changed since first I became your spiritual pastor! Forms dear and true and generous to me are no more present, forms from my home and forms from my flock. My heart cries after them, the scholar, the scientist, the artist, the statesman, the soldier, the philanthropist and the wise in affairs; gracious accomplished women, and young lives, beautiful and sweet, on whom the joys of this world were smiling

their invitations—dear friends and disciples departed—the good, the holy, the manly, the pure in heart. Truer friends in a church none ever had than have been mine for years. For those departed, now in heaven, I thank God. I thank God for you who remain. I may say, in lines of Wordsworth, you remember

‘The thought of my past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction.’

I thank God for the consideration, the patience and affection with which you have ever regarded me. But the time had come, while strength remained unbroken, for me to accept a new position with somewhat different work ; and I accept it thankfully ; a position of which any man may well be proud. Painful as it is to leave the work which may be considered the work of my life, it is right it should be done. That work is handed over to another whose enlightened spirit will make him a welcome teacher ; and I hope I may be permitted

from time to time to speak in this place, crowded with memories fast bound about my heart. But there is the final change to be contemplated. To some of us it must come soon. To all it will come quickly. Let us pray that it may be to the

‘New heaven and earth wherein the just shall dwell
And after all their tribulations long
See golden days fruitful of golden deeds
With joy and love triumphing and fair truth.’

Amid all the changes which at times cast a gloom upon our minds, and darken them with doubt, so that we are uncertain where is the path which leads on to truth, let us be faithful to duty, and to love which is best, and wait the rising of the Sun of righteousness—sure that the day will dawn and the shadows flee away.

‘Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,
Ease after war, death after life does greatly please.’

With deep thanksgiving for the past, with hearts to love and labour while life

shall last, with ' hopes which wander through eternity,' shedding their brightness upon us, let us gather around the Communion Table and keep the feast of the living and the dead—' the whole family in heaven and earth ' ; and then go forward each our several way in brotherhood which death cannot dissolve—go forward till the end comes—' For this God is our God for ever and ever. He will be our guide unto death.'

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